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Where a nation was born

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BY EDITORIAL

New Jersey was literally the Crossroads of the American Revolution. The four major armies involved - the British, the Hessians, the French and George Washington's Continental Army - passed through colonial New Jersey numerous times. Popular historian David McCulloch's book, "1776," which currently tops the best-seller charts, describes in its climactic pages Washington's desperate retreat across the state, after suffering defeats at the battles of Brooklyn and Manhattan's Fort Washington, to keep his - and America's - date with destiny at Trenton and Princeton. In the war's endgame in 1781, Washington and French ally Jean B. de Rochambeau raced down New Jersey toward Virginia, where they would trap and overcome the British army.

Major events occurred during the war in and around Boston, Saratoga, Philadelphia, Williamsburg and other points with names well known to history - and New Jersey can be linked to nearly every one of them. Nearly 300 battles and skirmishes were fought here, more than in any other state. Washington and his army spent nearly half their wartime service in New Jersey. The hardships to civilians were intense. The patriots in Washington's army suffered severely. Liberty wasn't won easily.

However, Revolutionary War sites such as the Old Barracks and Rockingham, the battlefields at Monmouth, Princeton and Red Bank, Washington Crossing State Park and Washington's winter encampment at Morristown never have received their proper degree of attention. That would change if a congressional bill that has been pushed by the state's delegations to the Senate and House of Representatives for several years could finally win passage.

The bill would create The Crossroads of the American Revolution National Heritage Area, comprising a stretch of New Jersey spanning 13 counties and linking a series of independent but related historic sites. The sites then would be eligible for \$10 million in federal grants over the next 10 years to help with preservation, recreation and education efforts; these funds could be leveraged to bring in additional contributions from state and local governments, corporations and private foundations.

In 2002, the U.S. secretary of the interior found that the tract and its sites met all the National Park Service's criteria for the designation. The bill was

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approved by the Senate that year, but died in the House. Last month, it again received Senate approval, thanks to the efforts of New Jersey Sens. Jon Corzine and Frank Lautenberg. Its bipartisan sponsors in the House, Reps. Rush Holt, D-Hopewell Township, and Rodney Frelinghuysen, R-Harding Township, will need the strong support of their 11 colleagues in the New Jersey delegation to convince the rest of the representatives of the legislation's merits and win its passage.

A Crossroads heritage area would pay tribute to the patriots who fought so bravely for the freedoms we enjoy today. It also would help preserve treasures of American history, draw tourists to New Jersey and assist the state's economy by coordinating the promotion of these widely scattered sites for the first time. The case for its creation is a powerful one.

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